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Creating capitals: The rationale, construction, and function of the imperial capitals of Assyria

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Chapter 8: Conclusions

8.1 A MODEL FOR ASSYRIAN CAPITAL CREATION

Based on the comparative investigation of archaeological and historical evidence, this study proposed a new model for the study of newly created Assyrian capitals: Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta, Kalḫu, Dur-Šarrukēn, and Nineveh. Throughout this study, I argued that attempting to pinpoint a single reason for the creation of each Assyrian capital is pointless. As demonstrated by the case studies, capital creation is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon that affects, and is affected by, multiple parameters. This has been shown most clearly by deconstructing the dominant regal-centric approach on capital creation, in which the king is the sole agent responsible for the creation of a new capital.

I proposed two main frameworks for the synthetic investigation of capital creation that move away from one-dimensional explanations. The first one forms the backbone of this research and is comprised by the three research questions of the why (rationale), how (construction), and what (function) of each new capital. The second is a triangular framework that combines multiple parameters related to capital creation: first, the historical conditions under which a capital was created, second, the type of resources exploited, and third, the agents who acted towards the creation of a capital. I will now bring the two models together, and show how they link to each other, as well as the value of such a new approach in the study of capital creation.

For the rationale behind capital creation, the why question, it is central to first investigate the historical conditions. I argued earlier that all capitals are created during periods of *imperial transformation* for Assyria. This is comprised by three main elements: i) territorial growth; ii) economic growth; and iii) developments in the imperial administration and ideology. Every capital creation in Assyria coincides

with the period when the Assyrian empire reached its maximum territorial extent (see also Figure 45).

Associated with this territorial growth was an economic growth. This can be seen in the agricultural intensification of the conquered regions (Parker 2001; Kühne 2013; 2015), the extensive redevelopments in the Assyrian core and the hinterland of the new capitals (Morandi Bonacossi 2017a; 2018), and the increased taxation in the form of tribute from conquered states (Oates and Oates 2001, 90-104, 226-256). Adding to this is the fact that capital creation is an economically intensive strategy. The need for available resources for the undertaking of such a project is high, as was illustrated in the discussion regarding the construction of city walls. Crucially, none of the new Assyrian capitals seems to break the continuity of the Assyrian empire. While each capital is associated with administrative, ideological, and economic changes, these changes were never associated with an overhaul of what could be considered as traditionally Assyrian (Liverani 2017). This goes against the view of Joffe (1998), who suggested that newly built capitals are associated with the emergence of new elites, sudden shifts in the iconography and the symbolic vocabulary, and new forms of political legitimization.

In the end, there cannot be, and should not be, a single answer to why Assyrian capitals were created. The why question should be answered only contextually, and by synthesizing multiple factors. As such, I argue that the creation of new capitals is an intentional and standardized strategy of the Assyrian empire, effectively used to signify the growth and accommodate the administrative developments of the empire. Capital creation is driven by, and occurs only after periods imperial transformation. This transformation brought the sufficient influx of resources and allowed key agents to initiate these projects.

Moving on to the construction process of Assyrian capitals, the *how* question, I argue that the proposed triangular model can help us to understand further how capitals were created. While the rationale of capital creation is driven by processes of imperial transformation, the construction process is driven by those agents who act within their contemporary historical conditions and resource availability. Central to the process of construction is the *availability* and *exploitation* of resources by these agents (Figure 49). The people engaged with the process of capital creation constitute three main groups: i) the kings; ii) the elites; iii) the labor force/people. The role of kings and elites has already been discussed in relation to the rationale behind capital creation. The role of all three groups in the construction process, however, is revealed in the available textual documentation, and mainly the textual corpus related to the construction of Dur-Šarrukēn (Parpola 1995).

In that corpus Sargon is shown as the one having the final word over every decision regarding issues of construction. He claims, in fact, that it was him who “*planned and thought day and night in order to make this city habitable, and to erect its shrines as abodes for the great gods, and a complex of palaces as my royal residence*” (Lyon 1883, 14).³⁸ To what extent this is true, however, is unclear. Parpola suggests that such a statement is not “empty words”, as from the documentation it seems likely that Sargon was seriously engaged in the process (Parpola 1995, 52). While part of the documentation for Dur-Šarrukēn seems to stem from Sargon himself (six letters), most of the documents (fourteen letters) are actually signed by the treasurer Tab-šar-Aššur, one by Sennacherib, and the rest come from various officials (ministers and provincial governors) involved in the project (Parpola 1995, 51). Such a corpus shows the complications of capital creation on an organizational level. Even in the case of Dur-Šarrukēn, which seems to be the capital where the king has the most central role, the construction process depended on the cooperation and competence of several other actors.

The picture becomes even more complicated when the labor force is considered. The role of the labor force, I believe, should not be understated in any construction process. Much like the execution of the commands coming from the king is dependent

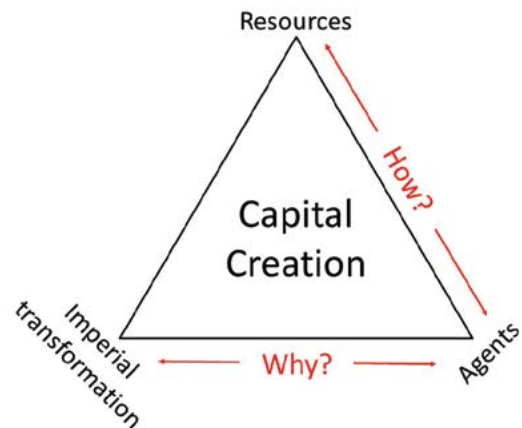


Figure 48: Model for the rationale and construction of Assyrian capitals, produced by the author, produced by the author.

on the interplay between the king and those who execute these orders, similarly, I suggest, the execution of the physical construction is dependent on the interplay between the officials in charge of construction and the construction workers themselves. This is illustrated by the correspondence for the construction of Dur-Šarrukēn and, through the labor force analysis conducted above.

I suggest that the construction process needs to be studied from two perspectives. The first is the technical perspective, which involves the actual practice of construction, the type of required material, and the amount of labor required. This technical perspective, like the task-force analysis performed in this study, reveals the “hardware”, or material, aspect of construction. However, this hardware aspect also needs to be studied in relation to the “software” practices, namely the interplay between the king, the elites, and the labor force for the construction of a new capital. Finally, the combination of the corpus studied by Parpola, the discussion conducted for each case study, as well as the task-force analysis, suggest that the process of construction was similar in every Assyrian capital. This further supports an overall idea of continuity in the strategy of capital creation.

The production of this model of interaction for the creation of new capitals goes back to Sewell’s theory discussed in the introduction of this study (see section 1.3.2). It is recalled that Sewell argued

³⁸ A similar case could perhaps be true for Nineveh and Sennacherib as well, but the data are significantly more limited.

for a dynamic interaction and interdependency between human agency and historical processes. It has been shown, through investigating the reasons and process of construction of Assyrian capitals that it is this constant interplay between active agents and historical conditions that form the phenomenon of capital creation.

Reviewing the reasons behind capital creation in Assyria, it can be concluded that there are no deterministic factors that definitely lead to capital creation. The similarities, however, between the historical conditions during which Assyrian capitals were created are striking. As such it is possible to identify broader patterns that are present in most cases of new capitals, but there is also variability of outcomes (i.e. the abandonment of Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta, the long lasting Kalḫu, the never-used Dur-Šarrukēn, and the transformation of Nineveh). This variability shows that Assyrian kings and elites might have acted with certain intentions for creating new capitals but their imperfect knowledge and actions had resulted in unintended consequences (see also Joyce 2004).

At the same time, the creation of new capitals is shaped both by the visions of their planners, but also by the actions of the labor force and agency of the people living in these spaces (Lefebvre 1991). This informed the last question set out in this study related to the *function* of every new capital. This proved to be both a relatively easy question to answer in regard to the administrative functions of a new Assyrian capital, but was a particularly difficult one in regard to the urban functions of these capitals.

When it comes to the administrative function of Assyrian capitals, we do not see any significant variation from one city to the other. The overview of the citadels of all the capitals examined in this study shows that the elite spaces were comprised of the same types of buildings (i.e. palaces, elite residences, temples) that served the same functions. The citadels of new capitals were always walled, and in three out of four cases (i.e. the three Neo Assyrian capitals) physically elevated above the rest of the city, creating a clear division between the elite space and the residential/urban space.

Central to the role of every Assyrian capital is the fact that it hosted the primary palace, which acted as both the main residence of the king, and the main administrative institution of the Assyrian empire. It is the case in both the new capitals, as well as the

primary palaces, that we see a continuity in their development and evolution, rather than a departure from tradition (Kertai 2015).

Finally, every citadel hosted a number of residential buildings for members of the royal family and high officials. These buildings would act as residential spaces but also would serve as administrative institutions related to the function of the official living there. Only two capitals offer sufficient archaeological evidence for these buildings (Kalḫu and Dur-Šarrukēn), but their existence can be deduced comparatively from the open spaces in the other Assyrian capitals.

Therefore, in regard to the administrative function of Assyrian capitals, it can be argued that we have significant overlap and continuity. All the capitals shared the same functions: the primary residence of the king, the main administrative center of the empire, hosting high ranking officials, and an important religious center. No Assyrian capital can be described as an exclusively economic center, or exclusively a religious center/ceremonial center.

At the same time, it was shown that Assyrian capitals also constituted extended residential spaces. If we want to comprehend the full extent of the functions of Assyrian capitals, we need to study the residential spaces, what is termed as the lower city. However, data are extremely limited. Besides comparative data from other Assyrian cities, and a small amount of studies in lower cities of Assyrian capitals, there are no real excavation or survey data to work with. What can be said is that Assyrian capitals were diverse spaces, hosting a wide range of individuals from around the empire, and of different social classes.

The main goal of this research was to show how we can explain the creation of capitals in Assyria. It has been demonstrated that we can speak of a general model of Assyrian capital creation. This model, I have argued, shows that Assyrian capital creation was not a “quirk” of exceptional kings who decided to move their palace to a new city either out of arrogance or out of fear of existing power structures. Rather, Assyrian capital creation can be explained as a multifaceted imperial strategy that was implemented as Assyria transitioned into an imperial state, and facilitated its growing administrative, economic, and ideological needs.

8.2 APPLICABILITY OF THE MODEL THROUGH HISTORY

In addition to the study of Assyrian capital creation, I suggest that the analytical framework for capital creation used in this study can be applicable in other, ancient or modern, instances of the phenomenon. This has already been briefly discussed in the introduction of this study, in the introduction of this model. The question then arises, whether its use in the case of Assyria has shown potential for its use in other case studies.

A key result of this study is that Assyrian capitals are a product of and related to both continuity and transformation of the Assyrian empire. This is contrary to the idea suggested by Joffe (1998), that new capitals present breaks in the continuity of their states. I suggest that the concepts of continuity and transformation should be central in the study of every newly created capital. This could possibly be further illustrated by contemporary parallels to Assyrian capitals, such as the new capitals created during the Late Bronze Age in the Near East (i.e. Tarhuntašša, Amarna, Dūr-Kurigalzu, Dur-Untaš), a period of territorial and economic growth for multiple empires. In particular, during that period we have seen the growth of the Hittite empire, the rise of the New Kingdom in Egypt, the ruling of the Kassite dynasty in Babylonia, and the growth of the state of Elam.

In light of the results of this study, I suggest that re-visiting capital creations in Late Bronze Age empires, using the theoretical framework proposed here, would significantly reframe how we view these capitals, as well as how we perceive these empires. The capital cities of these empires, much like the ones of Assyria, have often been tied to specific rulers as their creators: Tarhuntašša with Muwatalli II (1295-1272 BCE); Amarna with Akhenaten (ca. 1353-1336 BCE); Dūr-Kurigalzu with Kurigalzu I (died in 1375 BCE); and Dur-Untaš with Untaš-Napiriša (possibly ca. 1340-1300 BCE). Little consideration has been given to the reasons for the creation of these capitals, their construction, or their urban life.

Furthermore, as discussed earlier, new capitals often have been associated with the transformation of modern nation states, like was the case with the post-colonial capitals of Africa (Hall 1993) or the post-imperial capitals of Europe (Makaš and Conley 2010). However, these could be assessed using the same model. This is not to say that every case of

capital creation presents the same characteristics of transformation. Assyria showed a transformation in its imperial system and administration, while post-colonial capitals of Africa can be linked with the change from colonial rule to sovereign national states. In terms of continuity, Assyria was transforming but not deviating from its imperial system and growth. Continuity in post-colonial national states can be seen in the re-growth of their indigenous population, the re-emergence of suppressed customs and ethics, and the re-establishment of their inland areas as focal regions of growth (Hall 1993).

I suggest that the model used in this study allows for a holistic assessment of aspects related to capital creation because it can accommodate exactly this variability of the phenomenon. The three main questions of “why, how, and what” are fundamental and widely applicable, while the triangular model can be adjusted and re-evaluated for each case study. Through the comparative investigation of evidence, the triangular model provides a framework to identify crucial patterns of transformations and continuity by relating the different questions and the different datasets with each other. This ability for modification of the proposed framework can be seen, for example, in the case of modern states where territorial expansion as a means of state transformation and resource acquisition is less relevant than they were for the Assyrian empire. We saw that in the case of European capitals of the 20th century, the fundamental role in the relocation of capitals was the fall of European empires (Makaš and Conley 2010). My model can be a useful tool for the assessment of both. It provides a solid framework for the study of capital creation, both individually, as well as comparatively, from the ancient to the more recent past, and even to future capitals.

8.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

In the wake of this study, the opportunities for future research have only increased. For those who wish to work with Assyrian capitals, the lower cities are, I believe, the most exciting place to conduct future research. Despite the limited available data, studying lower cities will have the most profound impact on our knowledge of Assyrian capitals, and Assyrian cities in general. At the same time, there is a lot more work required regarding the process of construction of cities. Modeling construction processes, either

through quantification (i.e. taskwork analysis) or through simulation (i.e. agent-based modeling) is a suggested way forward.

For those wishing to work with capital creation in antiquity, I am hopeful that the framework used in this study will be a useful tool. Several ancient empires have instances of capital creation which await to be studied comparatively. Particularly notable are the Persian capital cities – Susa, Pasargadae, Persepolis, Babylon, and Ecbatana – and their creation, their administrative role within the empire, and their co-existence.

Finally, I believe that the opportunity exists for a collaborative, comparative study between ancient and modern capital creation as phenomena. Identifying the key similarities and differences and working towards a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon is necessary. Crucial in such a study will be the collaboration between historians, archaeologists, political scientists, and urban sociologists.